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Referee Dick Bavetta Breaks Top Officiating Record

Washington, D.C., February 7, 2006 – Thirty-one-year veteran NBA referee Dick Bavetta considers himself to be a fortunate man. He is 66 years old yet feels like a teenager. He has been healthy as a horse for his entire life, and he loves his job. And an important reflection of his good fortune will take place tomorrow as he surpasses Jake O'Donnell's legendary record of 2,134 officiated games. What makes Bavetta's record even more intriguing is that his 2,135 games will have been consecutive.

2,135 consecutive games. That is 31 straight years of being tough but fair; 31 years of running wind sprints every other night for 48 athletically demanding minutes. But toughness and a quick clip are nothing new to this former New Yorker.

Bavetta comes from a family of New York City police detectives. His dad worked as an NYPD lieutenant during the time of prohibition and the Great Depression, while Joe, his NYPD detective brother, worked during the days of the French Connection and Frank Serpico. Deviating a bit, Dick received a degree in finance from the New York Institute of Finance, but kept in step with the fast-paced New York scene as a Wall Street broker.

It was Joe – his older brother – who got Dick involved in refereeing. Although Joe was a police officer, he found time to be involved in basketball, his favorite sport. Joe learned that he could be around basketball much longer as an official than as a player and he wanted to pass that information on to Dick.

Wall Street had a basketball league in the late 1950's that played its games at the Downtown Athletic Club. This is where young, ambitious brokers would gather to release excess energy after work. One night, Joe refereed a game in which Dick was playing. After the game, Joe suggested that Dick stick around and officiate a few games. He did.

Joe's plan worked. His little brother enjoyed officiating so much that he began refereeing games in public and parochial high school leagues at night. In 1966, he began officiating in the semi-professional Eastern League. While with the Eastern League, he tried out for the NBA every year for nine years. Finally, in 1975, the NBA gave him the opportunity that would begin his legendary career.

Entering the NBA could be considered intimidating. Not so for Bavetta. He faced every altercation, dispute, or difficulty with grace and grit. During a game in New York he was breaking up a fight between Knicks center Patrick Ewing and Jalen Rose. Rose inadvertently punched Bavetta in the nose, breaking it. He finished refereeing the game and the next morning had his nose surgically repaired. The night after that, he was on the court maintaining his consecutive game streak.

Bavetta displayed his trademark toughness and control in an important late-season game in the 1980s between the rival Boston Celtics and Philadelphia 76ers. Celtics guard Dennis Johnson collided with Bavetta's crewmate Jack Madden, breaking Madden's leg. This meant that Bavetta, in an era of two-man crews, had to finish the game by himself, which he did. As the game continued, he actually ejected two of the greatest players ever, Larry Bird and Julius "Dr. J" Erving. After all, they were strangling each other.

Even though Bavetta remembers when throwback jerseys were just shirts, and gym shorts were actually that, it doesn't make him self-conscious about his age. He is proud to be a 66-year old referee. Because he has been running up and down basketball courts for the better part of half a century, one might think his body would begin to break down, especially his knees. His secret to good health is not as high-tech as some might think. He says that the key is consistent exercise (running eight miles a day), and five pairs of socks. Of course, he also has to buy a pair of shoes that is a half size too big. His colleagues rib him about the socks and the shoes, but the five-sock phenomenon pays its dividends every night when the trainers come in the locker room with ice baths, massage ointments, and knee braces. Bavetta simply points to his younger crew members and says, "that's for them younger fellas."

Is he ever going to retire? Only when it isn't fun anymore, which is unlikely. He maintains that records have nothing to do with it. Being around basketball makes him feel as though he's celebrating his 16th birthday every day. And Bavetta seems to find good fortune in everything he sees. His positive attitude is contagious.

However, if he ever does retire, he will have plenty to keep him busy. He is just as passionate with the charitable work that he does in the community as when he is on the basketball court. In 1986, he established the "Bavetta Scholarships," which offer to minority and underprivileged children parochial high school scholarships. He has volunteered with the Double H-Hole in the Woods Ranch, working with critically ill children with the HIV virus or cancer since 1992. He also works closely with the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation and serves as the Upstate New York Regional Director.

He regularly speaks at schools and youth groups as well. There are some crucial lessons he wants to pass along to the kids with whom he works – always show up, never give up, and show respect to others. These are all the tenets of a good referee.

According to Bavetta, it's not the guys in the boardrooms but the folks answering the front desk phones that make the real difference. When he talks to kids, he makes sure to tell them that although they may not be as big and strong as Shaq or as talented in

basketball as Tim Duncan, they can do something good by showing gratitude for all their own unique gifts. They have to realize that someone is always looking up to them – even if it’s a little brother, a niece, or a neighbor. He lets them know that their example matters.

Dick Bavetta has become the gold standard for basketball referees. Little did Joe Bavetta know 40 years ago the impact he was making on basketball when he invited his younger brother to stick around and officiate a few games. Dick certainly stayed around basketball longer as a referee than as a player. And although he may be nearing the end of his career – and only he knows when that will be – his influence will be around basketball for a long time to come.

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About the NBRA

The National Basketball Referees Association represents 61 active and 16 retired referees who officiate all of the games for the National Basketball Association.